Chicken Bones

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Chicken Bones

by lurkinglurkerwholurks

Summary

It was like a gunshot, like an explosion, like a death. He didn't hear it so much as feel the snap of the toothpick-wide bone against his fingertips. It felt like an earthquake and he was shattering.

We're going to deal with some practical emotional fallout to certain canon choices that were made regarding Red Hood. Buckle up.

——Can be read as a standalone——

Notes

Blorted out without thought or consideration for Whumptober. No editing, we typo like mne.

Also, please see the end note for extra sadness.

See the end of the work for more notes

“Peace does not come before salvation, and salvation does not come without truth.”—Ekemeni Uwan

The truth was Jason was glad he had come. He hadn’t considered he wouldn’t, which in itself was a minor miracle and a warning sign. His life back in Gotham would never be fully settled. There were still cracks in the sediment, lingering fissures from upheavals both inflicted upon him and created by him, and the ground would never be wholly at rest.

Not in Gotham. Not with the kind of family he had. Not with the sort of person he was.

But Jason liked to think he had learn to find the rhythm amongst the turmoil. He might not be able to prevent the earth from coming unmoored, but he could learn to anticipate the trembles before they arrived. Mostly that took the form of sheer doggedness and unrelenting pessimism. (Realism, Bruce would say, and he would know.)

Which was what made the day such a tragedy. It had been a good day, a good day at the end of a string of good days, a day that Jason had woken up happy to be in. He had spent the majority of it in his apartment, a safe house that had become semi-permanent, with the *semi* fading more by the day. He had cleaned in the morning, dust and hair and grime flying up in clouds before duster and broom and lost beneath cascades of soap bubbles. It had felt good. Productive. He had gone to shower before his visit with a smile on his lips.

Heading out for dinner, too, had been pleasant. He had taken the long way, easing his motorcycle down side roads and back alleys at a speed that would have made the Commissioner’s mustache bristle but brought a grin to Jason’s face.

And when he arrived at the Manor’s front door, no dread gripped him. No doubts of what gauntlet he must run kept him from stepping into the foyer and calling out for Alfred. He slipped out of his leather jacket without a qualm, body bare of armor physical and metaphorical, waistband free of weapons of any sort. He greeted his grandfather. He waved to his father. He exchanged taunts with his siblings. The Manor wasn’t home, not anymore, but it held his home, or the promise of what his home could be if the healing continued.

He hadn’t questioned any of it. Hadn’t looked back at his weeks of

peace and contentment and worried. The little frictions that had arisen had been no more than the usual stresses of a life spent in a cursed city with too many siblings.

He should have known that nothing in Gotham could remain unmarred.

Dick had been the one talking, regaling his dinner companions with some of the stupider offenders he had come across along the path of his week. He was gesturing wildly with his salad fork, the utensil a baton counting out the beat of his story. They were seated in the back dining room, the glass doors rolled aside to let the crisp autumn air filter into the little-used space. Bruce had his collar unbuttoned to his sternum and sat with his elbows on the table, hands loosely clasped as he listened to his eldest. Damian and Tim were squabbling good-naturedly between them, while Cass picked at the last few croutons in her salad, and Jason enjoyed it all. Dick had a way of making the most mundane tale seem like a rollicking good adventure.

Dick was in the middle of describing what, exactly, he had decided to do with the alleyway full of bouncy balls when Alfred emerged from the interior of the Manor with the main course loaded onto his wheeled cart. The menu for the evening was a compromise between the butler's exacting standards and the relaxed nature of an indoor picnic. The initial pitch for fried chicken had been rejected and replaced by individual Cornish hens for that classy Alfred touch.

Plates were passed around, a hen per person (except for Damian, who was given a fruit salad), and enough sides to make Jason feel contentedly full just looking at them. Dick's story reached its peak, the air around them bright with the bite of autumn and the wheeze of Bruce's asthmatic goose laugh. Jason passed the basket of rolls to his left, then took the leg of his hen and twisted.

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Jason didn't hear Bruce say his name, the word drowned beneath the thunder rolling in his ears. He could see his own hands, still clutching the bird, and they were grey and trembling. Blunt fingers touched his wrist.

Jason was on his feet. His chair was overturned on the floor. Everyone was staring. He was already running.

Bruce caught up with him yards deep into the lawn, in the empty space between the house and the ring of trees that separated the Manor from the rest of the lawn.

Jason's muscles trembled. He wanted to keep running, to run and run and run until he passed the eastern edge of the world and drowned in the sun and the sweetwater. But suddenly Jason doubted that his legs could support him one more step.

"Jay?"

It was a gentle call, as was the whisper of a touch on his arm, but Jason was wild. He ripped away from Bruce, staggered, and only just managed to stay on his feet.

Don't, he wanted to scream. *Don't touch me.* But screaming required breathing, and he could do neither. He couldn't even stand up straight. He was empty, ghost-grey hands heavy like coffin iron and tingling with numbness.

The others were watching from the house. He knew this without turning to look, could feel the pressure of their attention and concern like chains around his neck. They could see him. He couldn't see them. His eyes were open but he was seeing a memory play across the lawn. A memory or a nightmare? It couldn't be a…But he could feel the reverberations in his hands.

"Jason?" Still quiet, but more guarded. Which Jason, it seemed to ask, would respond? Jason himself didn't know, couldn't answer. He had thought he was only himself, his true self unified at last, but one twist of a chicken leg and he was fracturing faster than Bruce would be able to salvage.

Bruce.

Bruce was here and Bruce knew. Bruce had been there, had seen, had still invited Jason to his table. Jason whirled, reaching blindly for a hand he knew would be there. Even without knowing who was reaching, Bruce's hand would always be there.

Bruce caught him, broad hands clamping around Jason's numb wrist and the muscled spread of his upper arm.

"Talk to me."

An order, calm and unyielding. In Batman's voice, it was like a blade

cutting through fog.

Air hissed from Jason's nose, shallow, shaking breaths as he tried to root himself to the earth, tried to keep the color in his vision, tried to parse what was real.

No, that was a lie. He knew what was real. He just didn't want to believe it.

"I killed them."

Would it have been better if his voice had wobbled? If his teeth had clenched and his words had shook and his eyes had filled with tears? They didn't.

He had seen a video once of a beach as the water pulled out, sucked back by the tsunami building out at sea. While disaster gathered miles away, tourists had gathered to gape at stranded sea creatures, gasping on the newly exposed seabed. Jason felt like one of the fools stuck in the muck, wet sand squelching between his toes.

Disaster was coming. It wasn't here yet.

"I killed them." Jason repeated, his voice to his own ears sounding flat and distant. "I hunted them, and I found them, and I shot them, and I killed them. Why did I do that? I laughed. I killed them and I laughed. I could have left them, if it was about justice. I didn't have to *cut off their heads*. I—"

He was on the lawn and then he was in the trees.

Jason's voice had been building, rising higher and higher like the crest of a wave, like the crescendo, towering above and throwing the world into deep shadow. But Bruce was the impact, the force of the ocean crashing down on him. Bruce's hands gripped his arms like iron bands, lifted him off his feet, and dragged him into the ring of trees.

As soon as they were out of sight, Bruce let go and Jason fell to his knees. He couldn't see the leaves that crunched beneath his hands. He couldn't breathe. Black spots trembled across his vision, and behind them he saw his gloved hands lifting a pair of pistols to the backs of oblivious skulls. He saw his steel-toed boots sinking deep into the ribs of men pleading for mercy. He saw blood spatter. He felt the crunch of a bone snapping beneath the pressure of a hunting knife. And then another. And another. And another.

Jason staggered to his feet, caught himself on the trunk of the closest tree, and vomited Alfred's dinner into the dirt. Then he did it again, spine locking into a tortured arc as he emptied himself of every good thing in him. And then a third time, until all that was left was a thick line of bile dangling from his bottom lip, undigested specks of food embedded like flies on a frog's tongue.

It wasn't enough. Jason couldn't be free of himself quickly enough. If he could vomit his own consciousness out of his body, he would. He gagged again, but nothing came, the force of it jarring free only his grip on the rough bark of the tree.

He fell, landing on his face in the dying leaves. The crunch of bone continued to reverberate inside his skin.

"I am going to touch you," Bruce was saying from far away, and then hands were cupping his shoulders and drawing him up. Arms bracketed him, bracing Jason's body as he shook like an addict in withdrawals, and a palm rubbed heat into his back.

"Breathe, sweetheart, breathe."

Jason shook his head, but Bruce was overriding him, forcing him to match breaths, to not tighten his lungs into bars of iron until he passed out.

This wasn't right. Bruce shouldn't be holding him, calming him. He *knew*. Bruce knew what Jason had done. He had seen the hideout with its blood-soaked walls, had opened the duffle bag, had ridden Jason's wave of chaos that had followed. This was wrong. Bruce shouldn't—Batman shouldn't—he—Jason had—

He'd known, of course, what he had done in Gotham. Jason remembered returning. He remembered the rage and the arrogance and the bloodlust. He remembered the surveillance, the grandiose plans of what he would do in *his* city, the bomb in Bruce's car. He remembered the assassinations. He remembered the fear. He remembered the unshakeable assurance that what he was doing was *right*.

Some parts of his first few months in Gotham had never faded. They were the memories that kept him awake and haunted in good times and chased him from the Manor for weeks in bad. But so much of it seemed like something that had happened to someone else or a movie watched during a bad trip.

Jason knew he had blood on his hands. He knew what he had done. But he had forgotten how it had felt to hack through the vertebrae of another human being. How it had felt to plant his boot on a broad, lifeless back to get the purchase to sever the last few stringy tendons of flesh. How it had felt to chuck his prize into a waiting bag like a piece of rotten fruit.

It had felt like nothing at the time, like one small step toward victory, a chore to be accomplished. Now it felt like everything.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” someone was saying, gasping the same useless apology over and over again between sobs.

Jason didn’t realize it was him until Bruce pressed a kiss to his temple.

No, not after what he had done.

“Jaylad, breathe with me.” Bruce was breathing slow and deep, his chest rising beneath Jason’s cradled head. He never wavered, not in the entire time it took Jason to claw air back into his lungs and cram his loathing into the cage of his ribs.

Jason didn’t know how long they sat there, their backs to an old oak and their bodies on a cushion of autumn-burnt leaves. Long enough for the sun to begin its slow dip into the horizon to come level with his face, dazzling his swollen eyes with golden light.

He shivered against the chill of the evening breeze. Bruce, unaffected as ever, merely shifted his arm across Jason’s back.

“How can you stand to look at me?” Jason’s throat felt scraped raw and the question was little more than a rasp.

Bruce shifted slightly, an inquiry without words.

“I killed people, Bruce,” Jason said, voice cracking anew at the confession. “Not just killed. I *decapitated* them. And I liked it. How can you—how can *any* of you—“

“You are my son.”

As if that were all there was to know. As if that erased what Jason had done.

Bruce shook his head like he read Jason’s thoughts. “It wasn’t… easy.

For me. And it wasn't overnight. And if you had continued, I…" Bruce pressed his lips to the top of Jason's head, warm breath huffing through his hair as if it was Bruce who needed the grounding now, if only for the moment.

"When you came back, you were… not yourself." Bruce's arms tightened further, catching Jason before he could protest or push away. "The circumstances don't excuse what happened. You still made choices. But the trauma wasn't nothing, Jay."

"But Bruce," Jason whispered.

"Do you still love Catherine?" Bruce asked.

Mom? Jason nodded without needing to think. Of course. Of course he did.

"Even after everything?" Bruce's voice was kind, but the question pricked like the sting of a knifepoint.

"Bruce, it's not the same—"

"It is." Bruce had a hand against Jason's chest to keep him still and would be able to feel the stutter-step of his breathing. "She made choices, Jay, and they weren't always good. Some were very bad, and you paid the price for them. You both did. But her addiction was real, and it wasn't an excuse, but it was a reason. And you still love her."

"She was my mom." She'd loved him and he had loved her. Jason would always, always love her. He would miss her every day of his life.

"And I am your father. You are my son. Good choices or bad, we work through them together."

The sun was gone by the time Jason unbent his aching knees and helped his father to his feet.

"I'm sorry for ruining dinner," he said as he brushed the leaves from his jeans. "I'll make it up to everyone somehow."

How, he didn't know. His debt was already unfathomably deep.

"Something like this happens again, talk to me," Bruce instructed. "Don't hide."

Bruce's thumb wiped the last lingering tear from Jason's cheek. Jason

huffed a broken laugh, embarrassed at last.

“Thanks, B.”

Bruce didn’t answer. His only acknowledgement was to pull his arm around Jason’s shoulders and guide them both toward the Manor where their family waited for their return.

End Notes

Secret: Bruce dragged Jason away from the Manor because Alfred doesn't know. He knows about the deaths but not about the heads. He wouldn't be able to bear knowing, so he chose not to, and Bruce has helped keep that knowledge from him ever since.

ETA: Also, I now consider this fic as the spiritual heir to The Return: https://archiveofourown.org/works/23726839

2025 ETA: I've started posting "behind the scenes" looks at the process of writing fics over on Tumblr. Here's the one for this fic: https://lurkinglurkerwholurks.tumblr.com/post/756285573373804545/chicken-bones

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!